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DEPT FOR AF/E
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018
TAGS: SOCI PGOV ER
SUBJECT: ISAIAS AND PFDJ OFFICIAL MEET WITH PUBLIC DISSENT

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Both President Isaias Afwerki and the ruling party's political chief Yemane Ghebreab faced strong dissent during their respective meetings with the Eritrean populace, contrary to glowing reviews plastered across the state-owned media outlets. An unusually feisty expatriate crowd in Washington, D.C. challenged Yemane on GSE policies, while Isaias took heat from ex-fighters outside Asmara. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On September 7, Yemane Ghebreab led a Washington meeting of about 100 expatriates, emphasizing Eritrea's "lasting peace and security," according to Eritrea's government-controlled newspapers and website. Although the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) version provided a typically sugary account of the meeting, three AmCits who attended the meeting recently reported that most individuals there expressed dissatisfaction with the GSE and openly questioned Yemane about the government's policies. The attendees asked particularly harsh questions about the GSE's denial of food shortages. Yemane reportedly could not answer the questions and said only he would return to Asmara for the answers.

¶3. (C) President Isaias Afwerki supposedly met with similar dissent from Eritreans in Debub region, immediately south of Asmara, during an October 10 visit. While the state-owned media reported the visit as a resounding success, this is far from the truth, according to the three Amcits. They said audience members challenged Isaias on his policies and accused him of hiding the truth regarding food shortage. These accusations came from older members of the crowd, one of whom allegedly told the President that he is unafraid to speak out about the government's policies.

¶4. (C) Comment: If true, these reports provide glimpses into the opinions of two populations who can most afford to speak out: the diaspora in the United States, which is relatively protected, and aging fighters throughout Eritrea whose patriotism is difficult to question. End Comment.

MCMULLEN